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ABSTRACT

A significant cultural divide between home and school has particular implications for the development of literacy for children whose home practices are not ratified in school. There is increasing evidence, however, that positive partnerships between schools and parents are correlated with enhanced academic outcomes for learners. This paper explores the coming together of two fields in educational research, home and school literacies, and the development of relationships between schools and the communities they serve. The paper reflects on research in progress that examines the articulation of these fields at the point of classroom practice. The research project seeks to explore the coming together of home, community, and school literacies at the level of pedagogy in schools serving disadvantaged communities in Sydney's (Australia) south western suburbs. The project has begun with an investigation into the relationships families have with their schools and continues to explore this as it affects on literacy teaching, the central focus being to discover and investigate the critical issues around pedagogy to emerge from the interplay between home-school relationships and literacy development. Some working definitions of literacy and congruence are developed before a consideration of new terminology to describe a different kind of relationship between home and school--these are then considered in light of classic and recent research into home and school literacies and school and community partnerships. Finally, the paper presents, together with discussion points and future directions, a draft model of congruence developed in response to early data gathered from three schools. (Contains 27 references.) (NKA)

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Be It Ever So Humble: Home-School Congruence and Literacy for Poor Kids.

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For some children the cultural divide between home and school is significant. This has particular implications for the development of literacy for children whose home practices are not ratified in school. Such children are likely to come from culturally and linguistically diverse communities and socioeconomically disadvantaged families. The linguistic patterns, literacy practices, and artefacts engaged at home and in the broader community are not always built upon in school. Instead there is increasing pressure for these families to 'do school' at home and little is done at school to recognise home literacy. This is despite both long standing and recent calls for teachers to be aware of community literacies and to build upon them in the classroom (Heath,1983; Cairney and Ruge,1998). There is however increasing evidence that positive partnerships between schools and parents are correlated with enhanced academic outcomes for learners (Epstein, 1995). This paper explores the coming together of two fields in educational research, home and school literacies, and the development of relationships between schools and the communities they serve. It reflects on research in progress that examines the articulation of these fields at the point of classroom practice. The research project seeks to explore the coming together of home, community and school literacies at the level of pedagogy in schools serving disadvantaged communities in Sydney's south western suburbs. It has begun with an investigation into the relationships families have with their schools and continues to explore this as it impacts on literacy teaching. The central focus then, is to discover and investigate the critical issues around pedagogy to emerge from the interplay between home school relationships and literacy development. Some working definitions of literacy and congruence are developed before a consideration of new terminology to describe a different kind of relationship between home and school. These are then considered in light of classic and recent research into home and school literacies and school and community partnerships. Finally, a draft model of congruence developed in response to early data gathered from three schools is presented together with discussion points and future directions.

Understanding Literacy

Current educational research is reconceptualising literacy. Terms like 'critical literacy' (Luke, 2000), 'multiliteracies', literacy as 'transformative'(New London Group,1996), and literacy 'toolkits' (Gee,1996) signal the increasingly complex ways in which literacy is understood. In many ways this current work builds on the substantial contributions of Halliday (1985) and Kale and Luke (1991) who articulated literacy as social practice, and Bourdieu (1977) who examined students' inherited linguistic and cultural competencies (cultural capital) and the ways in which school valued or devalued them leading to subsequent school success or failure. Thus for participation, success and creation in today's society, students must have a literacy 'toolkit' (capital) for exchange in increasingly complex and demanding worlds. Different literacies will have different value in different contexts.

Defining literacy as a social, cultural and dynamic phenomenon is helpful when investigating children from diverse and/or disadvantaged communitites. Firstly, it acknowledges the fact that children develop skills before coming to school and that they continue to engage in multiple literacy practices throughout their schooling years, and that these may be significantly different to school literacy expectations and practices. Secondly it enables us to examine the ways in which schools marginalise and devalue, for example, through assesssment and parent workshops, those literacies

that children themselves engage with. It is also consistent with what Street (in Au and Raphael, 2000:171) describes as an 'ideological' model of literacy. This model acknowledges meaningful literacy practices within families and communities which might be of considerable importance as "avenues through which students may acquire multiple literacies." In order for children to successfully navigate multiple worlds (eg. school, family, community), literacy must be broad, diverse and powerful across a range of contexts, and embody a range of practices, including those children are most familiar with.

Beyond Congruence, Towards Harmony

When literacy is viewed as a social practice increased value is placed on the literacy learnings that children acquire in contexts other than school. Having said this, schools serving disadvantaged communities are still charged with 'bridging the gap' between school and community worlds. Often the key to this is seen as establishing and maintaining positive partnerships with parents.

Effective partnerships between schools and families have been emphasised in long-standing as well as more recent research and are seen as instrumental in improving educational outcomes for children in disadvantaged communities (see Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995; Cairney and Munsie, 1995). The Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) argues for 'congruence' as one of area of action in improving literacy outcomes for learners, where congruence pertains to the alignment of goals and expectations between the home and school (DSP Case Studies, 1999). To extend the notion of congruence beyond mutual partnership towards an emphasis on classroom practice, the term 'harmony' will be used. This embodies the idea of mutually developing and supporting children's learning in ways that are complementary and comfortable. Practices that work in harmony with each other can work differently, but effectively in producing new learning in literacy. The home and school can become attuned to each other's practices with dual home and school benefit.

The term harmony is useful in understanding home and school relationships and literacy practices because it suggests mutually supportive as opposed to mirrored practices. Harmony in partnership and literacy practice is an area worthy of consideration in that it brings together two significant fields in educational research, that of home and community literacies and school-community partnerships. A brief look at research into home and school literacies will be followed by some work examining school-community partnerships and the ways in which some schools in Sydney's south west seem to be developing congruence and harmony.

Home and School Literacy

Literacy for children in poverty continues to be of considerable concern for educators, researchers and the community at large. The correlation between socioeconomic status and academic performance has long been established and whilst we might question the ways in which this is determined (Au and Raphael, 2000; Connell,1993) there is a need to address what and how literacy is taught in schools, particularly for those typically not served well by the schooling process. The 'literacy gap' – the literacy performance difference between mainstream and socioeconomically marginalised groups – is typically exacerbated not minimised once children enter and

continue school (Chall, in Snow,1991). The nature of this phenomenon is a continuing research theme.

There is a considerable body of research that examines children's pre- and out -of – school literacy practices and the ways in which these might serve them once in school. It is worth pointing out that such research has defined literacy and literacy learning as a social and cultural practice, and that the literacies acquired out of school are often not reflected in school discourse or school-specific literacy practices. Whilst early research, such as Wells (1981) emphasised the importance of being read to at home, subsequent work examined more closely the way in which the set of language skills required in educational settings is mirrored in some families (see for example, Dombey, 1983; Cazden, 1986; Williams, 1990). More recent studies have continued to build on the seminal work of Heath (1983) in describing diverse community literacies and school discourse and practices (see for example, Cairney and Ruge, 1998). The differing experiences with text also featured in the work of Shopen, Liddicoat, and Fitzgerald (1999) who found that outside of school middle school students engaged much more with electronic text, such as screen based games than with print typically emphasised at school. For these students there really was no place like home. Literacy models for these students need to be at once empowering and inclusive. Luke (2000) argues that a critical literacy model with an explicit pedagogy can mediate the home and community literacies and the kinds of literacy practiced in schools. As will be discussed later, this implies that as a minimum, teachers need to firstly understand literacy as a social practice and secondly to know about the diverse linguistic practices students bring to school.

Partnership, Communication and Congruence

A productive home-school relationship is implied, or in some cases, made explicit in much of the work on home and community literacy. As a minimum, teachers must find out about their communities. In improving academic and affective outcomes for learners, many have emphasised a proactive approach for teachers (see for example, Ogbu, 1992; Epstein, 1995). It has been argued elsewhere that powerful models of literacy must embrace an understanding of the context (Munns, Lawson and Long, 1998). Such sentiments place clear and unambiguous obligation on the part of teachers and schools to know the children, the families and communities they serve. This is no easy task given that communities are diverse and often transient. The work of some early childhood researchers offers useful advice here: build in systems for regular, two-way communication between the school and families (McNaught, Clugston, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz, Ashton, Hayden and Makin 2000). This may enable families and children voice in an organisation that does not guarantee students or parents a say.

Some Early Data

The current project's investigations into the communication practices of a number of schools that are part of the DSP entailed interviewing groups of parents about school relationships. Discussions began with a focus on communication practices. It was found that communication was often one way delivery of information (eg newsletters, morning assemblies) with parents and families as audience. Where more interaction took place, for example, face to face conversation, it was usually problem based and focused on behaviour, not literacy learning. The absence of two-way communication

did not seem to diminish what were clearly strong partnerships between the school and community. Both staff and parents described as extremely positive the relationship two of the schools had with their community and there were indications that there were structures that could support two-way communication but not systems that ensured it. For example, in these two schools, parents felt welcomed by office personnel, teachers and executives and they felt well informed about school events. Effective two-way communication, necessary for congruence, might lay the foundation for harmony of literacy practices. This idea will be taken up in the draft model. At this stage however, it is encouraging to see the possibilities for improved relationships between at least two DSP schools and their communities when the persistence of deficit discourse about children and families living in disadvantaged communities is well documented (see Comber, 1997; Hatton, Munns and Nicklin Dent, 1996).

Treating parents primarily as an audience for information about school and as means of endorsing the school's work at home can be problematic. On the one hand parents welcome information about what goes on in schools and how they might help their children at home. On the other hand, parents can be positioned as peripheries to children's literacy learning and home practices become devalued. This was evidenced in the ways that the schools offered reading workshops for parents to assist children at home in shared readings of picture books. The implicit logic here was that the school had it 'right' and all they needed was support from the home (Pitt, 2000). Furthermore, despite evidence that home shared reading- even in particular formats- might be overplayed as an indicator of school success (Dickinson and Tabors, 1991) schools continue to emphasise its place in the home and send 'home readers' into the homes of children. A deficit mentality can be seen to be operating in these types of workshops in that at best they seek to replicate school literacy and at worst they replace home literacy practices with the more highly valued school ones.

Parents spoke highly of these workshops however, and most were appreciative for the insights into school reading that they offered. The value might reside in workshops' opportunities to provide parents access to and knowledge of 'school' literacy, one with which they ordinarily might find unfamiliar. Indeed, positive effects on children's literacy performance have been documented when parents have been part of such programs (Cairney and Munsie, 1995). One parent interviewed recently however, was less comfortable with workshops showing her how to read with her son, suggesting that it had the effect of placing undue emphasis on her for the reading success of the son. Her comments endorse Pitt's (2000) sentiments that schools seek parental support of existing reading programs: "She (the class teacher) makes it sound like she's done everything and I just have to practice more with him." Others were also concerned about the way homework and parent workshops can make their role at home ambiguous and complicated. One stated, "I'm his mum, not his teacher." This signals a type of positioning of the parent as a novice initially (the school teaches them how they can share a book with their child) then as an expert (in their home, the intended destination of the workshop learning). It is significant that the child is positioned as a subject in these scenarios. They seem to do little to accept and build on what families, including children, have. At best they fit those already socialised into such ways of reading. The mismatch for families schools can potentially create was highlighted by one parent who said "home is home for my son and school is school. When he's at home we don't talk about school."

These observations and comments by parents begin to show some families see that what they do with literacy is distinct from the actions of the school. Congruence and ultimately, harmony is still possible for these families if there is an understanding of how some family and community literacy practices support the school, without being miniature imitations of lessons in the classroom. The role of decontextualised oral language for example, has been shown to play a role in future literacy success for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Snow, 1991; Dickinson and Tabors, 1991). This means that experiences different to those most heavily emphasised in the school might equally contribute in concrete ways to success in literacy at school. Such experiences might include rich mealtime talk and other narrative, exploratory conversation. Congruence might be implied, where home and community literacy practices do support the work of the school, but until this is mutual and articulated, more powerful harmony will not be realised. Current emphasis seems to be placed on parents supporting the work of schools and not the other way around. Even the support of parents is defined narrowly – support the work of the school by reproducing it at home.

Pedagogy – Going Backwards to move Forward.

There is ever increasing pressure for teachers to respond to wider social and economic changes, to improve their teaching, to enhance student outcomes. It might be necessary to take some steps backwards before charging forwards. That is, there may be little value in harnessing parent support for sociocultural or critical models of literacy if the paradigm for involving parents remains unchanged. Similarly, teachers cannot build on and value home literacy practices if they do not know about them. Teachers cannot value and respect what students bring to school if the only knowledge they have of them is what they see being produced or played out in the classroom. Congruence might happen by accident, harmony should happen by design. Such design might entail considerable and systematic investigations into home and community literacies using parent and student voices alongside teachers. It entails seeing parents as more than an audience to accepting parents as having considerable and valuable knowledge on their child's literacy behaviours.

What remains to be examined in detail is what knowledge of home literacy looks like in a classroom. McNaught, Clugston, Arthur, Beecher, Jones Diaz, Ashton, Hayden and Makin (2000) went some way in identifying the practices that value and reflect the existing ways of 'doing literacy' including systems for regular two-way communication, integration of literacy throughout the day and scaffolding literacy understandings. The focus on two-way communication is consistent with the findings of a study into partnerships in the middle years of schooling that also pointed to improved communication practices as prerequisite for effective partnerships (Shopen, Liddicoat and Fitzgerald, 1999). At this stage in the project, two schools are exhibiting practices likely to support congruence but not yet guarantee it, though there is a danger in suggesting that a series of steps will guarantee improved outcomes. Here exploration is the focus.

Below is a model suggestive of one pathway from congruence to harmony. The suggestions in phase one reflect the findings so far, that is the practices and features of the schools fostering what might otherwise be seen as a positive partnership with their community. The second and third phases are described in a less specific way, as these are areas for continued empirical clarification. It should be noted however, that the researchers of the Early Literacy and Social Justice Project (2000) reported on ways

in which early childhood centres established systems for two-way communication about children's literacy learning, fitting in with phase two of this model. There are then some documented strategies for educational settings within NSW and inclusive of disadvantaged communities. The current project continues to investigate congruence at the level of pedagogy- what is described as harmony - and it is for this reason that the third phase is yet to be more clearly defined. The model is hierarchical in that harmony in phase three depends on action in phases one and two. It reflects the dual imperatives demonstrated in the literature of knowledge of literacy as social practice evidenced in family and community practices together with the need for positive, productive relationships between schools and the communities they serve.

Pathways: From Congruence to Harmony – a draft model

Phase 1 – Supportive School Ethos
As seen through-
Open door policy
Approachable principal and staff
Translated Newsletters for Bilingual parents
Regular Meaningful Reporting
Active and central role of Community Liaison Officer
Community Room
Equal and participatory Decision Making

Parents have articulated those practices and characteristics of schools that foster a welcoming and supportive ethos. The following comment illustrates the mechanisms through which parents find out about their school. "We know what's going on through the newsletters, morning assemblies and other notes." Similarly, workshops describing how school is 'done' are seen as valuable for some parents. One parent stated, "we're told how to read to our children. How to do the maths. None of it is like what we're used to and it is very helpful."

Phase Two - System for Two-Way Communication
As seen through –
Multiple ways of exchanging information with families and children
(eg. groups of parents as well as one-to-one with teacher, multiple sites - e-mail, Internet networks as well as community sites.)
Regular conversations between teachers, parents and children about literacy learning

Parents sometimes see themselves as the ones responsible for initiating contact as evidenced in the following statements:
" I should really go and see the teacher"
"If parents aren't happy, they can come up to the school anytime"
However, statements such as these suggest that face to face contact with teachers is problem based and are contributing to misinformed assumptions that if parents don't contact the school, they are happy. Equally, it would be a mistake to measure the strength of a school-community relationship through the numbers of communications and/or numbers who attend meetings and workshops (Shopen, Liddicoat and Fitzgerald, 1999).

As one parent stated " An invitation wouldn't be enough to get me up here, especially if I was new to the area and didn't know any other parents."
Schools must initiate and maintain conversations with parents in order to share understandings of literacy.

Phase Three – Harmony – Mutually Supportive Literacy Practices
As seen through –
Articulated knowledge of practices in the home and community supportive of school
Articulated knowledge of practices in the school supportive of home and community literacy
Home and Community Literacy artefacts seen and utilised in the classroom
School literacy artefacts seen and utilised at home

Future Directions
For many children living in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, home and school are distinct in many ways. Traditionally schools have not supported the literacy learning of such students despite continued efforts in improved pedagogy. There is abundant literature to attest the socially and culturally specific literacies children acquire before school and continue to develop outside of school. Schools however seem to be slow in taking on board advice to find out about them and to respond to them in supportive ways. The foundations for harmonious literacy pedagogies however may reside in strong partnerships between schools and their communities. Such partnerships need to be generated and maintained with a strong, shared understanding of literacy as social practice. How harmony might look in primary classrooms in disadvantaged communities is an area of continuing investigation.

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